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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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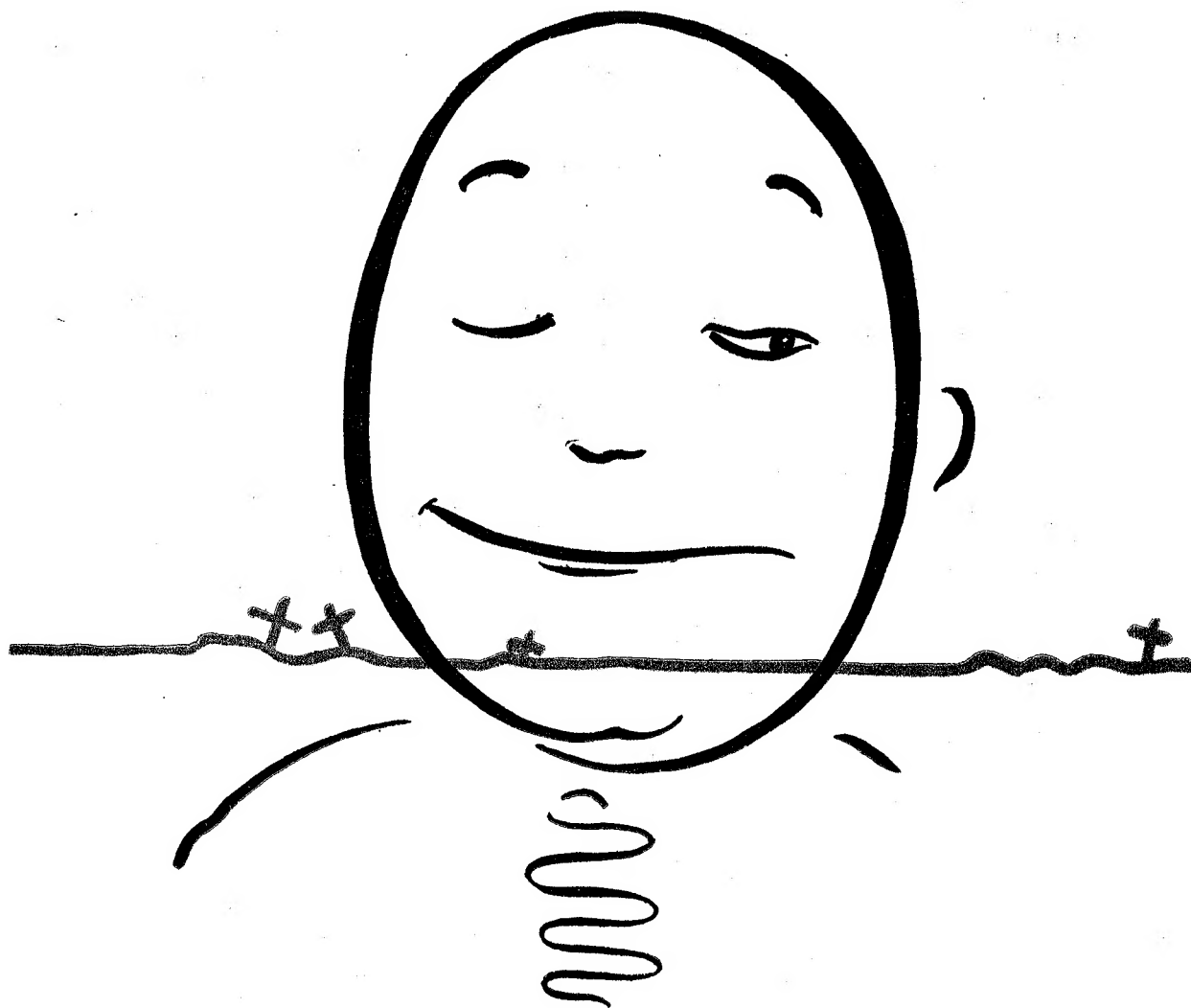
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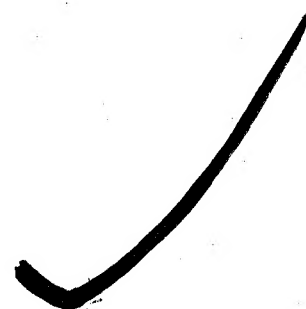
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Here we have what is known as a house guest, from the Latin Obnoxious Eternitymus. In fact, in this saga there are three of the species. Of course they came unexpectedly and stayed and stayed. As for the dishes, naturally, they didn't help wash or dry. Nor did they even clean the guns they used so effectively.



HOSPITALITY

Most Serene



by
Jack Ritchie

THERE wasn't much I could do about things, so I shuffled the cards for another hand of solitaire.

The tall one they called Hank stared moodily out of the cabin window and Fred, who was built heavy, kept busy trying to get local news on the portable radio.

The fellow with the thin mustache, who seemed to give the orders, sat at the opposite end of the table watching me play.

"What do you do to live in a place like this all year?" he asked.

I put down a couple of cards. "Some hunting and trapping in the winter. Fishing now and then." I looked up. "A little farming when I have to."

The boss man, in addition to the thin mustache, had dark brown eyes and a meagre smile that was always a part of his face. "You're taking this all pretty calm."

I shrugged. "I don't know enough yet to get excited."

He grinned. "That's the way to take it. Just behave and you got no worries for awhile."

The three of them had come in with their guns at noon and taken over. It wasn't me they were interested in. I was just something that happened to be in the place where they wanted to stay.

Fred turned down the volume of the radio. "I'm hungry."

"There's a side of venison in the storeroom," I said. "Cut off what you want. Better take a flashlight. There aren't any windows or lights in there."

Fred got a carving knife out of a drawer and came back with about three pounds of meat. He put it on the table. "You do the cooking, mister," he said, and it was an order.

I went to the sink and began cutting the venison into steak sizes. The boss turned up the radio volume for the six o'clock news.

When it was over, I took the big skillet off the wall hook. "They got pretty good descriptions of all of you. I guess you took your time."

"Don't let it worry you," Fred said.

I lit a cigarette. "My guess is you got rattled. You didn't have to kill the cashier. Jim Turner was a real meek man; he wouldn't have made any trouble."

Fred leaned back in his chair. "You got a cracker box bank in that town of yours. According to the announcer it was robbed last year, too."

I nodded. "Folks around here figure Willie Stevens was in on it. Nobody's seen him since it happened."

Hank switched off the radio. "We'd be in Chicago now if it wasn't for that stinking car."

I tapped cigarette ash on the floor. "I'd say you were lucky it broke down. You'd probably have run

into a road block if you kept going. You city boys think the picking is easy out here because there's a lot of space between houses. But we got county patrol cars and all of them got little radios that work."

Fred grunted. "Your boy Willie made it."

I shrugged. "Willie is part of this country. He knew a lot of roads that aren't on the map."

I put some wood in the stove. "I suppose you left the car right where it broke down."

The boss grinned. "Us city boys, we got some brains too. We pushed it off the road and nobody's going to find it until we're long gone."

Hank unlocked the satchel they had brought with them and dumped the money on the table. His long face was satisfied. "Eighteen grand."

I opened a couple of cans of vegetables and started the coffee. "Comes to six thousand apiece. If you split fair and even all around."

The boss looked my way. "That's our business."

I grinned faintly. "I was just thinking. Six thousand isn't a bad pile of dough. Just about what a good plumber earns in a year. Maybe he'd have to put in some overtime though."

I turned over the steaks in the skillet. "Seems kind of funny for you to be in the same class with plumbers. Know what I mean?"

The boss frowned and pushed back his chair. "Let's get this stuff off the table and eat."

I set the table and brought over the food.

Hank talked with his mouth full. "When we get back to the city, it's nothing but the best for me. Thick steaks, expensive liquor, and the same kind of women."

I punched open a can of condensed milk and put it on the table. "This may seem like a foolish question, but what have you got in mind for my future?"

Fred showed white teeth. "Don't worry about your future. It's all planned."

When they finished the meal, Hank used a toothpick and looked at the other two. "How about a little quarter limit poker? We got to do something to kill time."

I went to the shelf for the cards. They were busy counting their change, so I slipped the ace of spades out of the deck and put it in my pocket.

Then I made myself a steak sandwich and sat down at the table to watch them play.

Hank had a run of luck and when he filled an inside straight to beat Fred's three aces, I sneaked the ace of spades out of my pocket and held it against the bottom of the table with my knee. "Sometimes you can judge a lot about a man just by the way he plays cards," I said. "Especially in an honest game like this."

The boss played with the two quarters he had left. "See anything interesting?"

I waited a couple of seconds and then cleared my throat. "No. I guess not."

Fred looked at me thoughtfully. Then he reached for the cards and began counting them.

I moved my knee and let the ace slip to the floor.

Fred tapped the deck with his fingers. "There's one missing."

I leaned over and looked under the table. "Here

it is. On the floor. Looks like it fell accidentally." I smiled at Fred. "I guess you could have used that card the last hand. Too bad it wasn't in the deck."

Fred looked at Hank with a glint of speculation in his eyes and I knew there wasn't going to be any more poker that night.

I looked at my watch and yawned. "There's only one bunk here. I guess you won't let me have it, but that still means two of you will have to sleep on the floor."

I pointed to the deck. "Why don't you cut cards to see who gets it?"

The boss glanced at the other two and then got up. He went to the bunk and began taking off his shoes.

"Well," I said, letting Hank and Fred see my smile. "I guess that settles who gets the bunk."

The boss put one shoe on the floor and looked in my direction. "You sleep in the storeroom. We wouldn't want you cleaving our skulls with an axe while we're asleep."

I lit a spare lantern, grabbed a blanket and went into the storeroom. I could hear one of them fasten the hasp and slip something into the staple.

My storeroom is the only other room of my cabin. It's cut into the side of a hill and has a dirt floor. The only way to get in or out is through the door to the main part of the cabin.

I waited a couple of hours until I felt sure they were asleep and then got busy. I took a small trowel from a rack and began digging in the dirt near the door.

When I had a hole eight inches deep, I selected one of my traps, the big one that held a black bear last winter.

I anchored it inside the hole and set it. Then I stretched a strip of burlap over the hole, pegging it taut with wood slivers. I sprinkled earth around until the burlap was concealed.

I lay a board over my work and then went over to the potato barrel where I kept my money in an oilskin bag. I took out fifteen twenties and slipped them into my pocket.

I spent the rest of the night sitting on a box and thinking about the three of them out there and what I was going to have to do in the morning.

It was about eight o'clock when Hank unfastened the door.

I stepped into the main room. "Good morning," I said, making it sound cheerful enough to irritate him.

The boss was still sleeping on the bunk, but Fred was sitting at the table. His night on the floor hadn't made him too happy. "Make some coffee," he snapped.

I grinned and began making breakfast. When I went to the cupboard for the eggs, I left the door open so that they would notice the gallon jug on one of the shelves.

The smell of the bacon frying woke up the boss. He yawned and fumbled for a cigarette.

I nodded to him. "This air and a good night's sleep makes you feel like a new man."

Fred scowled at me. "What's in the jug up there?"

I shook my head doubtfully. "Something that

might be too powerful for you this early in the morning. Unless you got the stomach for it."

"Bring it here," he growled.

He pulled the stopper and smelled the liquor. Then he poured out a glass and downed a swallow. His voice was raw. "You make this stuff yourself?"

I shrugged. "There's no tax stamp on the jug."

After breakfast I sat down at the table and idly riffled the deck of cards. "I don't suppose any of you would be interested in poker?"

Fred poured himself more whiskey. He stared at Hank for a moment. "Why not? Nothing like a friendly game."

I put some change on the table. "Let's count the cards first," I said.

After a few hands, Hank began drinking too. "How long we got to stay in this place?"

"A couple more days," the boss said. "We're safe enough here."

Hank looked sullen. "I say it's better if we take off right now. We're bound to pick up a car on that dirt road this time if we'd just wait long enough."

The boss glanced up from his cards. "We stay until I say we can go."

Their eyes held for ten seconds and then Hank looked away.

I rattled a few of my coins and said, "It's easy to see who's boss here."

Hank glared at me and refilled his glass. He took off his coat and tossed it on the bunk right next to the boss's sport jacket.

We played a half an hour and then Hank began winning. After he took a big pot away from the boss, I shook my head, saying, "Maybe I ought to have a little of that whiskey. I guess it's giving Hank a lot of luck."

The boss stubbed out his cigarette. "Pour me a glass too."

On a hand of seven card stud, I dropped out after the fourth card and went to the water bucket.

The betting was heavy at the table and they weren't paying any attention to me. I took the twenties out of my pocket and slipped them under Hank's coat on the bunk.

They were still betting when I took my seat. There were about forty bucks in the pot when the boss folded his cards and dropped out.

Fred and Hank kept raising until Fred finally called.

Hank grinned and turned up four nines.

Fred's face was livid and he slammed down his cards. "I'm through with this sucker game!"

Hank stopped grinning and leaned over the table. "Just what'd you mean by that?"

Fred lurched to his feet, at the same time drawing an automatic from his shoulder holster. "Nobody wins all the time. Not unless he's got quick fingers."

The boss stood up, his face hard. "Put that gun away."

Fred lowered his gun slightly. "It was a mistake our taking that bum along with us. We never did know a hell of a lot about him."

I went over to the bunk and picked up Hank's coat and the money beneath it. "Here's your coat, Hank," I said. "I guess you're not wanted."

I shook the coat slightly and the money dropped to the floor. It landed with a slap that got everybody's attention.

Even with his heavy drinking, Fred reacted first. He glared at Hank. "You dirty double-crossing thief! I knew we should've got more'n eighteen grand out of that job."

Hank's jaw was slack as he stared at the money on the floor.

Fred's gun was up again. "You were carrying the bag all the time," he said to Hank, "and you got the key."

Hank realized what was coming and his voice rose to fight against it. "I never saw that—that money before!"

Fred's grim expression didn't change. And the gun in his hand blazed twice.

Hank shuddered with the impact of the bullets and he spun to the floor. It was my guess he was dead even before he finished falling.

Fred stared down at the body, shaking with anger now. The boss was looking at Hank's body, too, his face hard.

I sank down on the bunk, still holding the coat. After a second or two, I let go of it and my hand moved a few inches. When I stood up again, I had the boss's coat over my arm.

"Well," I said quietly, "I guess now you split the money only two ways."

They looked at me and Fred's eyes narrowed as he stared at the coat. "Let me see that," he all but shouted.

He yanked the coat out of my hands and turned to the boss, "This isn't Hank's coat," he said angrily. "It's yours."

I began edging toward the storeroom door.

The boss frowned, real puzzled, as he looked at the coat, and then he caught a glimpse of me near the storeroom door.

His eyes widened with sudden understanding.

"Don't be a fool, Fred. Can't you see what's been happening?"

But Fred wasn't listening to the words. That grim expression was back on his face.

"You stupid jerk . . ." the boss began hysterically.

Fred's gun roared.

I darted into the storeroom and slammed the door behind me. Groping in the dark, I pulled the board from the top of my . . . ap. Then I crawled behind one of my potato barrels and waited.

It wasn't more than half a minute before Fred opened the door. He stood silhouetted against the light, one hand steadying himself on the door frame and the other holding the gun.

I called him a name and heaved a potato at him. It got him in the chest and he snapped a shot into the darkness.

He muttered something then and started moving forward. On his second step, he screamed as the jaws of my bear trap snapped shut.

I felt along the wall until I touched the spade. He was clawing at the steel jaws when I swung the spade against the side of his head. That one swing was enough.

I picked his gun off the floor and went cautiously into the cabin. The boss was just as dead as Hank, just as dead as Fred.

Then I poured myself a drink.

It was going to be hard work dragging the three of them into the woods and burying them.

But at least there was no problem about where I'd do it. The little glen in back of the cabin was perfect. There was plenty room for three more.

That was where I buried Willie Stevens about a year ago, after we robbed the bank. We got only five thousand and I didn't think that was worth splitting.

I got the key off Hank's body and went to look at my money.



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